

Public Hearing for S.B. 1085 – Testimony by Garry Monk, NVCLR

Written Testimony Concerning Proposed S.B. 1085, An Act Concerning the Legalization of the Retail Sale and Possession of Cannabis and Concerning Erasure of Criminal Records in the Case of Convictions Based on the Possession of a Small Amount of Cannabis

Distinguished members of the Committee on the Judiciary, my name is Garry Monk. I am a veteran of the U.S. Air Force and the Executive Director of the National Veterans Council for Legal Redress (NVCLR) in New Haven. I support S.B. 1085 — An Act Concerning the Legalization of the Retail Sale and Possession of Cannabis and Concerning Erasure of Criminal Records in the Case of Convictions Based on the Possession of a Small Amount of Cannabis — as an advocate for the veterans and other members of our communities who have been devastated by this state's inhumane and unforgiving policy of criminalizing cannabis and those who use it.

NVCLR is a Connecticut membership-based organization that seeks to assist veterans with less-than-honorable discharges, and to educate the public about the plight of these veterans. We also provide veterans with support in obtaining employment, medical and educational benefits, as well as meals, clothing, transportation, and housing. Many of our members, including my own brother Conley, returned home suffering from conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder and opioid use disorder.

I cannot begin to describe to you how difficult these and similar service-related conditions make rebuilding their lives. My brother's combat experiences gave him such severe PTSD that for years he was unable to sleep. He jumped at any little noise, and suffered flashbacks so intense that sometimes he was unable to tell whether he was here or back in Vietnam. Unfortunately, he began self-medicating with opioids. But once he was clean from hard drugs, it was cannabis that calmed him and helped him achieve a real sense of peace. The West Haven police arrested my brother for marijuana possession in 1982, however. He then suffered a relapse of his opioid addiction, from which he has since recovered, in the years that followed.

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Cannabis was the best option for my brother. This state took that from him, and saddled him with a criminal conviction for possession, too.

My brother's experiences are not unique – not among the veterans that NVCLR serves, and not in Black communities here in Connecticut. Veterans like my brother can benefit tremendously from this state's medical marijuana program, but the problem is that they can't access it. First, veterans with less-than-honorable discharges have long been unable to access VA healthcare. This means that there are still veterans in this state with undiagnosed PTSD. Like my brother, they may be buying marijuana off the street to self-medicate. This is preferable to hard drugs and paralyzing anxiety and other symptoms, but it makes them vulnerable to arrest, a criminal record, and all of the negative consequences that come along with that, including an increased likelihood of homelessness and joblessness. Second, for those veterans who do receive VA healthcare, the VA prohibits its doctors from certifying patients for the medical marijuana program. The alternatives are either to find a private doctor at the cost of hundreds of dollars a year, or again, buying off the street. Neither option is a good one.

I ask the members of this Committee to remember veterans like my brother and support the inclusion of provisions in the full legalization package that would remove barriers to medical marijuana certification for Connecticut veterans, and that would make medical marijuana affordable for low-income patients. This includes: (1) fully eliminating medical marijuana fees for veterans; (2) including veterans among those eligible for medical marijuana subsidies; (3) allowing veterans with VA-diagnosed qualifying conditions to register for the medical marijuana program without additional physician certification; and (4) considering veterans whose less-than-Honorable discharges were related to cannabis as "equity applicants" in cannabis licensing.

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Finally, I especially urge the Committee to pass S.B. 1085, which would erase possession convictions like my brother's. This state has spent far too much of its limited resources criminalizing the very people it should be supporting. You all have the opportunity, and the obligation, to make things right for my brother, for NVCLR's members, and for others like us. Thank you for your time.